

Cultural Competence In Social Work Literature: A Comprehensive Review

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INTRODUCTION

The social work profession's adoption and adaptation of the cultural competence model has led to substantial literature development with regard to defining and achieving cultural competence, as well as conflicting views of its soundness, feasibility and measurement in social work practice. Diversity and cultural competence content are mandated for accredited social work education, though the extent to which they are explored in social work courses is unclear. Few research studies have systematically examined cultural competence in the social work literature.

OBJECTIVES

This study aimed to:

- Identify social work literature providing guidelines for cultural competence in social work education and practice
- Examine specific strategies delineated in the social work literature for achieving cultural competence in social work education and practice
- Provide a concise review of social work literature on cultural competence

METHOD

Table 1. Searches

Search Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1. Contains key terms cultural competence, cultural competency, social work, diverse, diversity and training	1. Did not address cultural competence in the context of social work education or social work practice
2. Contained in one of the following databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, Social Work Abstracts, SocINDEX with Full Text	2. Publication in a journal not recognized by the Author's Guide to Social Work Journals
3. Published between January 2001 and February 2011	3. Editorial
4. Published in a journal recognized by the Author's Guide to Social Work Journals (NASW, 2009)	4. Not available in English
5. Peer-reviewed	
6. Provides guidelines for cultural competence content in social work education and/or the achievement of cultural competence in social work practice	
7. Available in English	

Review of the cultural competence literature revealed four broad themes among the 77 publications that met the criteria for inclusion:

- Cultural competence in social work education
- Assessing and measuring cultural competence
- Providing culturally competent social work services
- Training on cultural competence for social work practitioners

RESULTS

Table 2. Cultural Competence in Social Work Education

Theme	Author/Year	Findings/Recommendations
Course design	Fenster & Rose, 2003; Hall & Theriot, 2007; Petrovich & Lowe, 2005; Phan et al., 2009; Spears, 2004	Students receiving multicultural instruction in safe and challenging learning environments increased awareness and knowledge, were more likely to see issues with intercultural communication as systemic and feel more competent handling possible racial discrimination
Course Content	Bender et al., 2010; Carter-Black, 2007; Kohli & Faul, 2005; May, 2010; Hodge & Limb, 2010; Nagai, 2010	Students explored their family histories, multicultural and diversity content, including GLBT content and spiritual assessments and used storytelling
Theory	Abrams & Moio, 2009; Ortiz & Jani, 2010	Recommended using Critical Race Theory to address issues with the cultural competence model
Models	Blunt, 2007; Crewe, 2004	Reviewed Blunt's Model of Cultural Competence for Transformative Education, models to increase ethnogenerontology content in social work curricula
Teaching strategies	Messinger, 2004; Miller et al., 2004; Pardeck, 2001; Steiner et al., 2003; Dewees, 2001; Kohli et al., 2010	Suggested that instructors should acknowledge differential student development, focus on taking action, use structured controversy, use the Americans with Disabilities Act as a teaching tool and instruct students to critique each others' work for bias
Field education	Early et al., 2003	Students reported statistically significant levels of learning about diversity; field instructors' ratings of students' competence were significantly lower than student ratings
Instructional technology	Huff & Edwards, 2001; Lee et al., 2010	E-mail and electronic discussion groups and online diversity forums were rated as positive overall for learning diversity content
Cultural immersion	Cordero & Rodriguez, 2009	Provided anecdotal evidence of students' transformative learning experiences through a cultural immersion experience

Table 3. Assessing and Measuring Cultural Competence

Theme	Author/Year	Findings/Recommendations
Students	Bertera & Littlefield, 2003; Mindrup et al., 2011; Walls, 2009	Revealed positive results in learning cultural competency and technology, significantly greater levels of white privilege awareness and higher levels of cultural competence
Social work practitioners	Lu et al., 2001a; Lu et al., 2001b; Teasley, 2005	Clinicians' achieving styles were culturally bound and reflected in clinical decision-making, perceived levels of cultural competence were associated with perceived levels of postgraduate professional development
Social work faculty	Van Soest et al., 2001	Social work faculty across all demographic groups tended to have a high sensitivity to racism
Evidence-based practices	Aisenberg, 2008; Boyle & Springer, 2001; Iglehart & Becerra, 2007; Briggs, 2009	Reviewed contradictions in approaches to ethnic-sensitive practice, suggest that evidence-based practices lack cultural competence and recommend culture-specific instruments, cultural values included in EBPs and participant involvement in designing EBPs
Practice models	Davis, 2009	Examined overlap and discrepancies of diversity practice models and participant conceptualizations
Measurement tools	Krentzman & Townsend, 2008	Recommended four scales: Multicultural Counseling Inventory, Multicultural Counseling and Awareness, Miville-Guzman University-Diversity and Ethnic Competency Skills Assessment
Essential components	Kwong, 2009; Simmons et al., 2008; Ben-Ari & Strier, 2010	Identified critical concepts in culturally competent practice, review the NASW's cultural competence indicators and recommend reconceptualizing cultural competence using theory of 'Other'

Table 4. Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice

Theme	Author/Year	Findings/Recommendations
Interventions	Barrio & Yamada, 2010; Evans & Garlick, 2002; Jackson, 2009	Recommended community-based, family-centered, culturally-sensitive, resiliency-focused, multi-session and multifamily interventions to increase use and quality of services
Cultural characteristics	Choi, 2001; Hodge, 2005; Cameron et al., 2008	Described heterogeneity among Asian American elders and barriers to service utilization, basic beliefs, practices and values that commonly characterize the House of Islam in the US, characteristics of Asian and Pacific Islander Americans and preferences for mental health care
Guidelines	Allen-Meares, 2007; Hodge & Bushfield, 2006; Min, 2005; Nylund, 2006; Parrott, 2009; Van Den Berg & Crisp, 2004; Delgado & de Saxe Zerden, 2007; Ledesma, 2007; Hung et al., 2010; Kedell, 2009; Lee, 2010; Weaver, 2004; Bushfield & Fitzpatrick, 2010	Reviewed tenets and responsibilities, anti-oppressive, anti-racist and critical multicultural practice, cross-cultural competence, spiritual competence, Latino cultural assets to inform practice, knowledge, skills and values necessary for work with Native Americans, Arab Americans and GLBT participants, attachment theory to understand the importance of culture, establishing non-hierarchical rapport to overcome linguistic barriers, narrative ecological approaches to working with people who identify with multiple ethnicities
Practice Models	Organista, 2009	Identified four dimensions of culturally and socially competent services for Latinos in generalist and specialized practice levels: accessibility, assessment in the social and cultural context, culturally and socially acceptable interventions and service accountability
Tools	Congress, 2004; Maiter, 2009	Introduced a culturagram for assessment with diverse individuals or families; recommends a discursive, anti-racist framework to analyze services, develop interventions and inform research
Social work practitioners	Allain, 2007; Camacho, 2001	Reported that social workers seek theoretical models and skills to enhance their work and must be skilled in conflict resolution
Social service administration	Mallow, 2010; Ambtman et al., 2010	Recommended organizational meta-cultural competency for diversity management, concentric model for change at the macro and meta levels beginning with an individual's changed values and attitudes
Research	Poupard et al., 2009	Proposed reality-based research, built upon community-based participatory research, to develop authentic partnerships with American Indian communities
Conflicts	Maiter, 2004; Yip, 2005	Reviewed cross-cultural issues with traditional and Western values and ideologies, parents' and child welfare professionals' differing ideas about who could be helpful with family issues
Issues	Mokuau et al., 2008; O'Donoghue, 2005; Hung et al., 2010	0.64% of articles published between 1995 and 2004 focused on Native Hawaiians and other Pacific Islanders, many combining them with Asian Americans; White mothers of biracial black-white adolescents focused cultural teachings on African American culture only

Table 5. Cultural Competence Training

Theme	Author/Year	Findings/Recommendations
Training	Armour et al., 2004; Bourjolily et al., 2005; Williams, 2005	Intercultural competency training, cultural competence workshops and diversity training increased awareness and progression and resulted in fewer avoidant behaviors
Clinical supervision	Hair & O'Donoghue, 2009; Okech & Rubel, 2007	Proposed a social constructionist perspective and social group work model to examine diversity in supervision

CONCLUSIONS

Cultural competence is a complex issue that is addressed at multiple levels:

Social work students examine their own cultures as well as their beliefs about their own and other cultures to begin to develop cultural competence.

Social work educators engage students in ongoing discussions of culture, privilege and oppression.

Clinical social work supervision encourages transparency, collaboration and exchanges of ideas in the supervisory relationship to promote cultural competence.

Culturally relevant approaches to social work practice promote partnership with program participants and working within their cultural values, adopting participants' values as the norms.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE IMPLICATIONS

Future research is necessary to extend beyond social work literature to seek and evaluate additional cultural competence models, training protocols, strategies and assessment and measurement tools that exist in other literature.

Few specific strategies and tools are delineated for teaching cultural competence and culturally relevant social work practice beyond a limited number of sessions. Further research is needed to develop additional educational materials and training workshops that address specific dimensions of culturally relevant social work practice.

With only five of the seventy-seven articles in this review focusing on cultural competence training for social work practitioners, future research is necessary to develop additional cultural competence training to ensure the translation of new information from research to practice.

It is also notable that only one article in this study specifically focused on cultural competence in the context of social work research. Future research is needed to examine cultural competence in research design, implementation and translation to ensure the cultural relevance of knowledge production.

CONTACT

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